



AP Photo

Rex Jackson, one of a handful of southern Utah water witchers, searches for under-

ground water in Bloomington. The branch points downward when he faces water.

Jackson said he can find water within five miles and determine its depth.

Water witchers claim ability to find water

ST. GEORGE (AP) — Rex Jackson gripped both ends of the Y-shaped stick and turned his body slightly. With each turn, he repeated his plea: "Most underground water within a mile."

His voice grew strained on the fifth mantra, as the stick swung down and pointed to the east.

"The water is there, over that hill," the 75-year-old St. George resident said.

Jackson said he can find water within five miles and determine its depth. He said the branch, which goes down on its own with an irresistible force, would rip up his hands if he tried to stop it.

Jackson is one of a handful of "water witchers" in southern Utah that claim a mysterious abil-

ity to find underground water. In addition to branches, some witchers use wires or other methods. Some observers believe the witchers. Others don't.

"Some people think I'm nuttier than a fruit cake," Jackson said.

Still, plenty of water wells in the area were drilled only after a witcher determined there was water below. Even skeptics often consult witchers to be on the safe side, said Ron Thompson, manager of the Washington County Water Conservancy District.

Thompson said he suspects witching works because it's used so commonly.

"I've had a lot of engineers tell me they don't believe it but won't drill without it," Thompson said.

Brent Gardner, president of

Alpha Engineering, said he uses both witchers and geologists to look for water. Gardner said his father can witch successfully.

"I think it does work," Gardner said. "I've seen it work."

Scott Bulloch, principal with Bulloch Brothers Engineering Inc., disagrees. "I've seen them hit water, but I believe that's mostly luck," Bulloch said.

Witchers offer different theories behind their odd ability. Jackson thinks the power comes from the devil, saying it "scares the hell out of me."

Fellow witcher and Diamond Valley resident Glen Gubler said it may relate to magnetism of a body of water. Gubler said his branch can be tripped by power lines as well as water.

"The only theory I have is that it has something to do with the

electromagnetic field within you," Gubler said. "It works for some people and doesn't work for others. I know that."

Gubler used the skill as St. George water superintendent for 27 years before retiring in August 1993. He frequently witched before the city drilled for wells.

Gubler said a state geologist he knew was skeptical about witching until Gubler taught him to do it. It then worked for the man, Gubler said.

Thompson said one former water district engineer kept his witching ability a secret by sneaking out to use it, sometimes at night.

"He had a master's degree in civil engineering," Thompson said. "But when nobody was around, he would go out with his rod."